

Our weekly community profile

Family ties help bind Wrightstown

Villagers say everybody cares

By Tom Vanden Brook

Press-Gazette

WRIGHTSTOWN — Betty Klister asked her second-grade class what made their village a good place to live.

Without looking up from his coloring book, a young boy said promptly, "The kindness."

His response, brief as it was, spoke volumes about what distinguishes this Brown County village, Klister said.

Klister should know. She grew up in the area, has taught in the school district for several years and raised a number of children who, in turn, have become teachers.

And while Wrightstown has not cornered the market on kindness, it's not just window dressing either.

Klister, 51, pointed to the traffic accident last September that claimed the lives of six Wrightstown area teens and shattered the village's tranquility.

She said the community's response to that incident showed the mettle of Wrightstown.

"Everybody cared for the parents who lost children," Klister said. "A number of people went to the funeral and services. Everybody here got involved."

"That's the kind of place this is."

It's also a place where families take an active interest in the future of the village. For instance, Klister's son Steven teaches next door at the high school.

But perhaps the most convincing evidence of the family ties that bind Wrightstown can be found on Main Street.

Dick Vanden Wymelenberg, whose father and grandfather ran Dick's Family Foods before him and whose sons are set to take over from him, said that feeding four generations of Wrightstown residents has its benefits.

"I can call at least three-quarters of my customers by their first name," he said, casually proving his point by greeting a woman pushing a shopping cart.

"Hello, Carol," Vanden Wymelenberg said. "How are you this morning?"



Neighborhood grocery: Dick Vanden Wymelenberg, right, owner of Dick's Family Foods, helps Dorothy Baril of Little Rapids check out at the Wrightstown

grocery store. Vanden Wymelenberg's father and grandfather ran the store before him. His sons plan to take over the store from him.

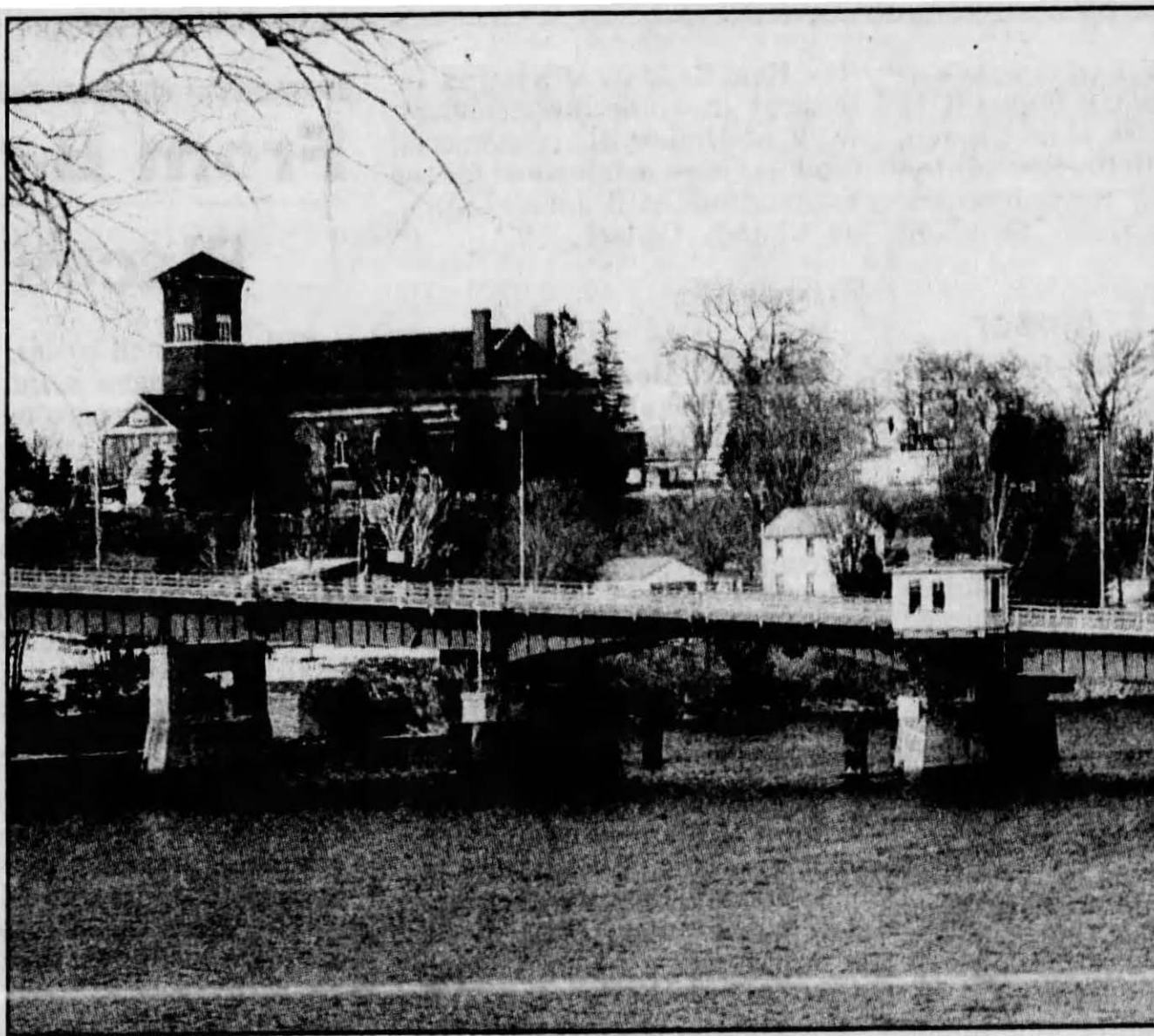


This weekly feature looks at small area communities and the people who make them tick.

The Wrightstown file

- ☐ Founded by Hoel S. Wright, mid-1800s
- ☐ Village incorporation: 1901
- ☐ Population: 1,282 (1988 estimate)
- ☐ School enrollment: 677 (kindergarten through 12th grade)
- ☐ Mail service: On one side of the Fox River, residents get home delivery. On the other side, residents pick up mail at a post office box.

Press-Gazette photos by Joan E. Gutheridge



Landmark crossing: The Wrightstown Bridge, with its sharp incline, is a focal point of the vil-

lage, and an important link to the Wrightstown residents on both sides of the Fox River.



Morning wave: Dr. Pierre Slightam of Wrightstown waves as he enters the post office building

in Wrightstown. The gesture is one example of the community's friendliness.

Places

"Like all small towns," he continued, "we have more personal contact and more personal interest in each other."

Yet Wrightstown is still looking for a way to turn that personal interest into business capital.

John Hart, a village trustee who chairs the planning committee, said Wrightstown's industrial park is all dressed up with no place to go. Attracting industry to Wrightstown, he said, is no easy task.

To that end, Wrightstown recently entered an agreement with a group that contacts and refers businesses to communities with appropriate facilities, he said.

Hart, who at 80 is a longtime veteran of civic affairs, said the community has several assets business would look for, including a relatively low tax rate, a skilled labor force and a solid school system that includes two parochial schools.

"It's a nice town," Hart said. "But it's hard to start a business here."

One drawback to commerce, Vanden Wymelenberg said, is also the geographic feature that defines Wrightstown.

He said the Fox River, which bisects the village, also has given Wrightstown a split political personality at times, with residents pushing for development on their side of the river.

"Years ago, there was always a little east-west division in poli-

tics," Vanden Wymelenberg said. "That river hasn't helped us any."

But today's mobile society, the grocer said, has dulled the edge of the often sharp cross-river debate.

"More recently, people have been moving here from other towns and they don't really care what happens on this side of the river or that," he said. "To them it doesn't really matter. And I suppose that's for the best."

Traveling through Wrightstown it's hard to believe this sleepy river town was ever the seat of heated political debate. From the school to Rose Buechler's tavern across the river, life here flows calmly, steadily.

"This is a sleepy, non-bustling, non-threatening type of place," said Dick Calaway, 48, the grade school principal. "You don't have to worry about traffic roaring through here. People here seem to be very pleasant with wholesome middle-class values."

"A lot of hubbub here there's not."

■ **Next week:** Gillett in Oconto County
